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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that English majors need some preparation for a wider choice of employment opportunities, the Michigan State University English Department initiated an internship program in 1979 to offer students work experience, vocational advice, and practical tips for securing permanent employment. Although the choices for English intern positions seemed almost limitless, the project director did find resistance to the program from business leaders, who had to be convinced that they could benefit from participation in the program. The best strategies for placing English interns in big businesses depended on contacts at the higher levels of corporations. In approaching prospective cooperating employers, the internship program director had to be prepared to guarantee quality work as much as possible. One pitfall in the program was the danger of exploitation of the interns by organizations that merely wanted an inexhaustible source of "gofers" and expendable freelance writers. To avoid these problems the director had to insist on employers' commitments to projects of substance that were English-related and to reasonable amounts of supervision. Another solution was to draw up contracts or work agreements at the first interview between the student and the cooperating employer. As a result of the program students gained realistic perspectives of the business world and knowledge about how to market their skills. (RL)

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THE ENGLISH INTERNSHIP PROGRAM AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

A favorite parlor game among English graduate students is the swapping of bad jokes about their future, since so many statistics point to a lower demand for graduates seeking academic jobs:

- -only one out of nine graduating in the humanities with a doctoral degree can expect employment in academe;
- -only 74.1% of the 1977 graduates, who received doctorates in English or American Literature, planned for careers in Educational institutions;
- -only 86.9% of those who earned doctorates in English during the last 42 years have been employed by two or four year colleges.[1]

According to these figures, at least 13% of the English doctorates find employment outside of the traditional educational institutions. Of course, even fewer students with Master's or Bachelor's degrees have found employment in higher education. Graduates have had trouble finding positions in secondary education as well. Michigan State University's Placement Services has again projected a surplus in the supply of secondary English teachers in 1979-1980, saying "The outlook for an increase in teaching jobs in the upcoming years remains rather bleak."[2] Teaching, the traditional source of employment for English majors, is obviously no longer the most plentiful source of jobs.

If academic positions are scarce, then what are the opportunities for liberal arts graduates in business? In a recent survey conducted by midwestern universities, two-thirds (67%) of the employers said that they would hire liberal arts graduates. Most of the employers

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(83%) ranked verbal skills "very important."[3] Most of them placed a high emphasis on good grades and exposure to business as well. Advice of the employers varied, but they emphasized the importance of business courses and business experience. They also stressed the importance of applicants' knowing about the field and organization to which they are applying.[4]

Few English majors, however, know anything about business, because few departments offer opportunities for learning about employment outside of academe. Yet one-quarter of the graduates with Ph.D's are looking for non-academic employment and half of the students with Bachelor's degrees are also seeking jobs in private enterprise, over one-sixth are after jobs with manufacturing concerns.[5] Realizing the difficulty of getting business experience, many would-be English majors have changed their majors from English to more "relevant" fields. The National Research Council on Higher Education shows a steady decline in the enrollment of English majors since 1970. In that year 4% of all the incoming freshmen indicated that they would major in English. By 1978, only 2% of the first-time, full-time freshmen indicated that they would choose English as their major. Not coincidentally, the business and engineering departments began to see a dramatic increase in enrollment in those years.[6]

Recognizing that English majors are demanding some preparation for a wider choice of employment and some exposure to business practices, the Michigan State University English Department initiated an internship program in the Winter Term of 1979. Dr. Linda Wagner, then Associate Chairperson of the English Department and presently a CEA

director, received a grant from the Quill Project of the Association of American Colleges. The grant provided enough funding for a half-time graduate assistant for one academic year, stationary, and a few books. The graduate assistant was appointed the official project director. In ten weeks the English Intern Program was in full operation. The goal of the program was to respond to the students' needs for work experience and to offer vocational advice and practical tips for securing permanent employement.

The project director found the first intern positions by looking in the yellow pages: "A" for advertising, "N" for newspapers, "P" for publishers, and "R" for research. The greatest demand for English students seemed to come from those who needed good writers. Many placements, therefore, were found with social service agencies sponsored by the federal, state, city and county governments. There is a demand in government today for clear, precise writers, careful editors, and researchers who use their common sense with confidence.

The choices for English intern positions seemed almost limitless: museums needed students for research; health services like family planning, heart, lung, and cancer wanted persons to produce pamphlets on preventive health for patients; non-profit institutions like scouting and 4-H needed organizers for conferences, researchers for fund-raising, and writers for newsletter. There were also unusual placements like an internship in tourism for the student who had a double major in German and English and the typesetting job for the student who was particularly sensitive to the influence of print on the reader's interpretation of the text. Positions as paralegal

aides, legislative aides, and political analysis also opened up for English interns. In a few weeks, the Internship Program listed more than a hundred positions for its students.

The obstacle for finding jobs was, and still is, the resistance from big business. Although the typical executive of a large corporation has a Bachelor's degree in the humanities,[7] few businessmen in the Mid-Michigan area are willing to take liberal arts majors as interns, largely because few want the headaches of temporary employees. They complain that one term of ten weeks is not enough time to orient a student when the instruction is not a part of the established management/trainee program. They are also concerned with the reactions of labor unions and the costs of being sued if a student were injured on the job.

While these arguments show legitimate reasons for their reluctance, businessmen have much to gain from participation in an internship program. Once they have the assurance that the students are carefully selected for maturity and initiative, employers soon realize that the program becomes a tool for low-cost recruitment. It enables employers to evaluate candidates for permanent positions without prior commitment. Through an exchange with students, employers also find that they eventually make an impact on higher education and begin to see humanities graduates entering the job market with more realistic expectations and better preparation. Finally, employers discover that ability to organize ideas, the ability to speak effectively with others, the ability to write clearly and precisely. Businessmen place a great deal of emphasis on spelling, punctuation, grammar, and

vocabulary, so they recognize the benefits of competent student assistance.[8] The best strategies for placing English interns in big businesses depend on contacts at the higher levels of corporations (personnel officers rarely see the usefulness of interns). and stressing the students' valuable skills.

In approaching a businessman, or any prospective cooperating employer, the internship director should be prepared to guarantee quality work, as much as this is possible. Employers who have agreed to participate will generally take the time to train students if they are impressed with their potential as workers. The MSU English Intern Program screens students for determination and interest. It therefore rejects, or postpones, the acceptance of students who lack clear definition of their career goals. Additionally, the candidates are screened for grade point average (3.0 or better) and for writing ability. They then attend mandatory workshops. Finally applicants must confer with the program director to choose a placement before interviewing with the employer. Some students have to compete with others for their positions as they would if they were applying for permanent employment. The process is somewhat tedious, but students who comply with all its prerequisites generally prove successful as interns.

One pitfall in internships is the danger of exploitation. Some organizations are tempted to fill their "go-fer" jobs with free student labor; others--like newspapers and magazines--find interns an inexhaustible source of expendable free-lance wirters. To avoid some of these problems the internship director has had to insist on the employer's commitment to a "project of substance that is English-

related" and the promise of a reasonable amount of supervision. Intern programs often use contracts, or work agreements, which are drawn up by the student and cooperating employer at the first interview. The contract describes the nature of the student's assignment and specifies his/her working hours and pay. The employer must agree to offer the student work which is compatible with his career goals and provide supervision when needed. Employers must also agree to complete two evaluations before the end of the student's term.

Student gains are clear. In exchange for eight to ten hours of work each week, English majors earn three hours of pass/fail credit and a valuable entry on their resumes. All interns have the opportunity to make contacts in their chosen fields and to seek advice from their supervisors on job hunting. Out of their field experience comes, moreover, a change to test professional objectives. Even those students who dislike their placements gain important information. Interns develop a more realistic perspective of the business world and usually return to school with a recognition of the need for supplemental course work. Some students are paid for their work; all students are rewarded by a confidence on the benefits of learning to apply the skills they had acquired naturally over four years. Through writing resumes and interviewing, students learn to market their skills.

The English Internship Program at Michigan State University is young; there are many possibilities for growth. The program might eventually offer variable credit based on the nature and extent of the intern's responsibilities. The program could also list field

experiences in far-away, exotic places and it might find more paid positions. By advising students from the time they enter Michigan State University until they are prepared to graduate, the program might someday offer extensive vocational counselling. More could also be done to meet the needs of graduate students. Expansion in new directions depends heavily on funding. Meanwhile the English Department has provided a model for other departments in Michigan State's College of Arts and Letters. This year the College has begun work on a program that will utilize many of the principles of the English Internship Program to be applied throughout the liberal arts. A college-wide program will influence a broader base of employers, educating them to recognize the merits of liberal arts graduates.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Lewis C. Solmon, "Ph.D's in Nonacademic Careers: Are There Good Jobs?" Paper presented at Session 2 of the 1979 National Conference on Higher Education, sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education, April 17, 1979. Solmon used tables taken from reports prepared by the National Research Council: Summary Report 1977 Doctoral Recipients from United States Universities, (Washington, D.C., 1979) and Science, Engineering and Humanities Doctorates in the United States--1977 Profile, (Washington D.C., 1978)

[2]John D. Shingleton and L. Patrick Scheetz, Recruiting Trends 1978-1979: A Study of 482 Businesses, Industries, Governmental Agencies, and Educational Institutions Employing New College Graduates, (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Placement, 1978), p. 24.

[3]Lanna Hagge-Greenberg, Report on the Liberal Arts Survey: Opportunities for the Liberal Arts Graduate. (Midwest College Placement Association Liberal Arts Group, n.p., August, 1979), pp. 4-11.

[4]Shingleton, p. 26.

[5]Calvert, Robert, Career Patterns of Liberal Arts Graduates. (Cranston, Rhode Island: Carroll Press, 1973), p. 73.

[6]Solmon, Table 2.

[7]"Portrait of a Typical Corporate Chief Executive," U.S. News and World Report, December 12, 1977), p. 69.

[8]Shingleton, p. 22.